The ADA, Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and Missouri:
Celebrating 25 Years of Inclusive America

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This week marks the 25th Anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act. On July 26, 1990, this federal mandate demonstrated our country's dedication to ending discrimination against people with disabilities. The goal of the ADA is to help all citizens achieve self-sufficiency and access equal opportunities to employment, education, transportation, and other public and private services. The versatility of the ADA has made it a universal model for the global disabilities movement.

The ADA was not developed without a long history of advocacy for people with disabilities. The years leading up to 1990 where marked by many different communities becoming more empowered and demanding recognition of their rights and abilities. Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act banned discrimination against people with disabilities in terms of federally funded projects and services. An emphasis was placed on raising awareness of discrimination, taking legal action against violations of existing laws like Section 504, and contacting Congress to pass new legislation. Movements like Deaf President Now at Gallaudet University in March 1988 demanded that it was time for people with disabilities to not only receive benefits of public services, but take on more active roles. The ADA was first introduced in Congress in April that year.

As a result of increased advocacy by Deaf community leaders in Missouri and the introduction of the ADA, Missouri Governor John Ashcroft signed House Bill 1385 which established the Missouri Commission for the Deaf in June 1988 (now called Missouri Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing or MCDHH). The Bill requires that the Executive Director of the MCDHH be deaf or hard of hearing. The current Executive Director of MCDHH, Opeoluwa Sotonwa, became deaf at age 16 from meningitis while living in Nigeria. The significance of the ADA has had a uniquely personal role in his life.

"I came to the United States because of the ADA," said Sotonwa. "I was involved in drafting Nigerian Disabilities Rights law and the concomitant hardship of getting the Nigerian legislature to pass the bill. It was like the saying, 'those who wear the shoe know where it pinches.'"

The ADA made great strides for deaf and hard of hearing people. Section 504 only prohibited discrimination in matters regarding federal funds; the ADA applies to a much broader range of situations, including those involving private organizations. Title II and Title III of the ADA guarantee free access to auxiliary services in order to facilitate effective communication. Title IV established a free national relay service that is available 24/7. Breaking down these everyday

barriers plays an important role in opening the door for opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing people to lead and to control their own futures.

But there is still work to be done. Deaf and hard of hearing people are facing old and new problems that are not compatible with the ADA. Many sports facilities fail to provide captioning for their events. Miscommunication with law enforcement sometimes leads to discrimination against deaf and hard of hearing individuals. In some areas it is still not possible to text 911. The Internet has brought its own set of challenges to equal access. The National Association of the Deaf's lawsuit against Netflix resulted in captioning on all of their movies and television shows in 2014. An ongoing lawsuit hopes to bring the same changes to free educational videos offered by MIT and Harvard, which are currently not captioned.

The collective fight to generate awareness of the rights of deaf and hard of hearing people, as well as other types of disabilities, is what will keep us on the path to equality and equal access. Continuing to empower our community and advocate for those who are wronged will bring us closer to our vision for the future.